

It's A Shell-A-Bration

Just when you think you've heard everything about recovery, along comes a Palooza! The Urban dictionary defines Palooza as "...an all-out crazy party; partying at one place with a ton of people like there's no tomorrow." And the Wiktionary describes it as an "exaggerated event. " The Recovery-A-Palooza was three such events!

The Living Center and Turtle Bay Café sponsored the first of three Recovery-A-Palooza picnic events in Nogales on May 18, 2012. The Events were part of the Mental Health Awareness month to give light to the struggles and stigma suffered by our brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, our sons and daughters, and our friends. These events were designed to bring together the community and bolster awareness in the idea that if one does not have mental health, one can not be truly healthy.

There was the classic picnic fair barbequed for all, music from a DJ, piñatas and football. The children were entertained by a clown who painted their faces and led them in song throughout the day.

"We like dancing. It's a lot of fun," said Amber, one of The Living Center friends. "Friends" are the term used for The Living Center clients. Amber went on to say, "One very special moment occurred when one of our other friends 'came out of his shell' for the first time and began dancing." Shane continued to explain that having us "friends" feel comfortable enough to come out of our shells and dance is a motto of The Turtle Bay Café; "You can dance if you want to." To see someone make that breakthrough is inspiring for all and a memory that all of us hold close for the rest of our lives.

"It's on the back of my Turtle Bay Café T-shirt. *You can dance if you want to.* It seemed that just about everyone at the event was dancing at one time or another. I even joined in for a while, Richard stated." More than that it's about feeling comfortable enough to do whatever you want. "This is how Turtle Bay Café makes me feel," stated Simon. Simon also stated, "I now feel the confidence to apply to get a job out in the job world."

The Living Center, The Turtle Bay Café, and PSA Art Awakenings, hosted the Recovery-A-Palooza II at the West Wetlands Park in Yuma on May 24, 2012. They were joined by Drug Court (a program for people who have substance abuse issues and are given a chance to reform instead of going to prison), the local probation department, Community

Bridges, ACTS, Horizon Human Services, and CIA, all of whom brought participants to enjoy the festivities.

The Yuma Palooza exploded with activities, such as: A jumping castle, a DJ and karaoke, dance contests and water balloon wars, PSA Art Awakening held a raffle to guess the number of skittles in a jar and a spirited soccer games rounded out the afternoon.



The highlight of this Palooza was when Raul began dancing to Vanilla Ice's *Ice Ice Baby*; with a series of pop & locks moves that brought smiles to the faces of everyone watching. Raul stated "I used to be shy, but volunteering at the café has allowed me to become more outgoing." Attending, was Alan L. Krieger, Mayor of Yuma, who looked to really enjoy himself. The mayor spoke to almost everyone at the event and everybody enjoyed taking pictures with the Mayor. Many of us friends thought it was very moving to see the mayor at the Palooza and stated how cool it was to see how many people showed support. Another notable was Akia Comptom from PSA Art Awakenings, who brought a lot of pizza to go with the burgers and dogs served by The Living Center staff.

The Living Center, The Turtle Bay Café, PSA Art Awakenings, and Pinal Hispanic Council sponsored Recovery-A-Palooza III at Villago Park in Casa Grande on May 25, 2012. This indeed was a Palooza and saw a huge turn-out and with no doubt had the largest and most diverse crowd of the three picnics. A giant jumping castles and welcoming posters held by our turtle mascots drew in many passersby to join all of us in the merriment.

Other agencies attending were: Community Bridges, The River Source, Horizon Human services, Cortazon, Helping Associates and agencies from Eloy and Coolidge. They all came together to enjoy picnic classics, such as sack races, tug-o-war, and my favorite, water balloon wars, brought to us by Pinal Hispanic Council's Erin Sullivan and Jennifer Dirnberger. There is nothing better on a hot day than water balloons! Other activities including: a wonderfully colorful spin art station provided by PSA Art Awakenings, conga lines and much dancing under the pavilion to the music provided by D J Andy Big-time Salazar.



It was obvious to me when the party was joined by the passersby and the welcoming they received from the Living Center friends and staff, that these people are sincere. That attitude is contagious. "I didn't see anyone just sitting, this is the first time I actually danced in ages," said Rosie. Everybody was up and dancing, laughing and eating and enjoying the day. We all were caught up in the joyous attitude from the very beginning. Cameron mentioned, "I have never had this much fun while being sober. Larry stated, "Having all the agencies participate together was very moving and great to see come together for one cause."

It's encouraging to see the communities pull together for events such as these three. This is the time for awareness and for society to let go the stereotypes surrounding us with substance abuse issues and serious mental illnesses and come to understand that we are wonderful people who may have illnesses but should be treated as such. I am proud to wear this Living Center shirt and to call these people my friends. I am sure there will be many more such events in the future for The Living Centers and Turtle Bay Café across the state of Arizona.

From us Friends in Recovery